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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2008

In Today's Papers

AKP Seeking Ways to Block Closure Case

All papers report the ruling AKP initiated efforts towards constitutional changes to restrict the powers of the judiciary to resolve the crisis over banning political parties. An AKP delegation led by government spokesman Cemil Cicek will prepare draft amendments to constitutional articles 68, 69 and 149. Opposition far right MHP leader Devlet Bahceli opposed the AKP proposal, saying the formula would trigger a constitutional crisis. Bahceli said the AKP's changes would undermine the powers of the judiciary, which would create more confusion. He offered to make changes in which sanctions would not apply to the entire party, but only to the politicians who are found to be in violation of the law.

Liberal Radikal says Bahceli's formula will result in saving the AKP while Erdogan and 70 other party officials will be banned from politics. Papers do not expect the AKP to accept the MHP approach. On Thursday, the AKP and MHP officials will come together to discuss the MHP proposal. Changes will be ready in a week, and if the MHP doesn't agree to the proposals, the AKP is planning to take their proposed reforms to a referendum, according to papers. Mainstream Milliyet says AKP is searching for possibilities for increasing the number of Constitutional Court members and making the court seek parliamentary approval for party closure cases. Mainstream Hurriyet writes the AKP's constitutional reforms are too little too late. Many legal experts say article 138 of the constitution will not permit AKP to pass any reforms while the closure suit continues. Mainstream Sabah says instead of banning the party, the Constitutional Court will opt for depriving the AKP of Treasury funds.

Party Leaders on AKP Closure Case

All papers report Prime Minister Erdogan said in Canakkale (Dardanelles) on Tuesday they were aware of the "plots against his party." Erdogan continued, "Everyone should be comfortable, there's no need to worry. We will not concede on democracy and freedoms." Opposition CHP leader Deniz Baykal said during his party group

meeting yesterday that Turkey was moving toward confrontation with "religion on one side and secularism on the other." Baykal warned, "Such a confrontation is dangerous. It'd be a dangerous effort for those who want to make political gains out of this situation." Turkey's main pro-Kurdish party DTP leader Ahmet Turk criticized Erdogan for defending democracy only when he needs it. Turk noted the closure case against the AKP was a "disgrace" for democracy. He also lashed out at MHP leader Bahceli's "dangerous mentality" that the DTP be excluded from possible constitutional changes to toughen party closures.

Article 68 says, "The statutes and programs, as well as the activities of political parties shall not be in conflict with the independence of the state, its indivisible integrity with its territory and nation, human rights, the principles of equality and rule of law, sovereignty of the nation, the principles of the democratic and secular republic; they shall not aim to protect or establish class or group dictatorship or dictatorship of any kind, nor shall they incite citizens to crime."

Article 69 says, "The dissolution of political parties shall be decided finally by the Constitutional Court after the filing of a suit by the office of the Chief Public Prosecutor of the Republic."

Article 149 says, "The decision for closure of political parties shall be taken by three-fifths majority."

Article 138 states, "No questions shall be asked, debates held, or statements made in the Legislative Assembly relating to the exercise of judicial power concerning a case under trial."

Casey on AKP Closure Case

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Liberal Radikal and Islamist-oriented Zaman report that US State Department Deputy Spokesman Tom Casey commented regarding the AKP closure case, "All entities involved should respect democratic institutions and values as well as the rule of law. In any democracy, the voters determine the country's political future. In Turkey the voters spoke in 2007. This approach reflects our strong support for Turkish democratic secularism."

Editorial Commentary on AKP Closure Case

"The Case Has Caused European Support for AKP to Peak" Selcuk Gultasli wrote in Islamist-leaning Zaman (3/19): "The closure case against the AKP has caused European support for the AKP to increase. Even when the AKP faced the military's warning on April 27 last year, European circles did stand up in support of the AKP. However, now every European Union official speaks so bluntly about the closure case that one might think they are actual AKP members! Like Turkish people, Europeans also say 'enough is enough' when it comes to excessive rhetoric. For instance, Olli Rehn, the EU Commissioner who is known for his meticulous attitude regarding language nuances, made a frank statement about the closure case. He openly insisted, 'The judiciary should not interfere in politics, and election ballot boxes should be the only reality in democracies.'" Given the encouraging and supportive statements from European Union officials, in fact, the AKP should be grateful to the prosecutor who filed the closure case against them. Because of this case, the AKP has gained enormous support from European circles, even from traditionally anti-AKP circles. Europeans did not take the prosecutor seriously, and as Olli Rehn put it, "the judge put himself in a funny situation." Because Turkey's reform process is taken seriously in the EU, the AKP should ignore the prosecutor and move on with the reforms."

Vice President Cheney Meets with Barzani in Erbil
Radikal, Sabah, Milliyet, Hurriyet, Cumhuriyet and Zaman:
Mainstream Sabah reports that following his visit to Baghdad, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney met with Kurdish Regional Administration leader Massoud Barzani in Erbil yesterday. VP Cheney asked for support from the Kurdish leader and said, "We trust Barzani's leadership in US-Iraq strategic relations and in reaching political consensus in Iraq." Islamist-oriented Zaman reports Barzani said,

"Cheney's visit is an historic day for Iraqi Kurdistan. This visit indicates U.S. support for the people of Iraq and the Kurdistan region." Mainstream Milliyet says that Cheney will be in Ankara on Monday and meet with President Gul. Leftist nationalist Cumhuriyet writes in "Barzani Entertained Cheney," that, "Barzani highlighted the visit as an 'historic' event for northern Iraq," but that "the fifth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq was marked by a bloody attack in which at least 78 people died." Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak writes "Cheney emphasized 'We will be here until the end of our mission,'" as "a bloody balance sheet marks the fifth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq." Liberal Radikal writes "Cheney drew attention to efforts against the PKK." Mainstream Hurriyet notes Cheney's statement in a headline, "We Trust in the Leadership of President Massoud Barzani."

NATO Plans to Build Missile Shield in Turkey

Tabloid Aksam and Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak report that, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer told journalists that NATO

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is working on a short-range defense system that will cover Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. Scheffer added that the NATO system could be merged with the U.S. missile defense system.

Editorial Commentary on NATO Bucharest Summit

"Missile Shield vs. Soldiers' Blood"

Umur Talu wrote in mainstream Sabah (3/19): "As the Bucharest Summit approaches, the NATO Secretary General expressed his strong desire that Turkey increase its troop levels in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, U.S. Vice President Cheney will ask for the same thing when he

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visits Turkey. In other words, while we are occupied with domestic debates, Turkey is becoming a part of the missile shield program. Of course in exchange for the shield, Turkey will be asked for the blood of its soldiers. There is an irony here as well. The missile shield is part of U.S. efforts against Iran, while our soldiers shed their blood in Afghanistan against the Taliban. The U.S. does not want Pakistan's nuclear weapons, which were provided by the U.S., to pass to the hands of the Taliban. The U.S. also wants to prevent any threat from Iran to Israel. In sum, the U.S. takes every possible effort to minimize the loss of American forces. Meanwhile we are joining the partnership against Iran and the Taliban. Cheney is coming to Turkey to discuss Iran and missile defense. That is the very reason Cheney is asking for an appointment with the Chief of Turkish General Staff in addition to his appointments with leaders of the civilian government."

MHP-DTP Agree 'Nevruz' be Declared Official Holiday

Liberal Radikal and mainstream tabloid Aksam report opposition far right MHP lawmaker Atilla Kaya has submitted to parliament a bill to declare March 21 as official holiday for celebrating Nevruz. The pro-Kurdish DTP supported the bill. The parliament general assembly will discuss the MHP proposal soon.

TV Highlights

CNN Turk

Domestic News

- 21 civil organizations in the mainly Kurdish southeastern city of Diyarbakir have released a joint statement to denounce the suit for banning the AKP.
- Labor Minister Faruk Celik said the controversial social security reform bill will be taken up by the parliament next week.
- Direct foreign investments in Turkey have declined by 86.3 percent from the same month last year.

International News

- Conservatives prevail in Iranian elections, but the reformists accuse the government of irregularities in counting the votes.

- Talks between top US and Russian officials have ended without compromise on the disputed US plans to deploy a missile defense shield in Europe.

- London Mayor Ken Livingstone will face at least 12 challengers to a third term in office but his most serious competition comes from Boris Johnson, a candidate of Turkish origin.

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